At the Hospital

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At the Hospital

You are lying in a private room in a hospital. You came in for a physical. You feel fine, as well as you've felt in years. The room is not luxurious or even especially comfortable. A cheap vase of sweet-smelling yellow flowers, a rented radio, and a black rotary-dial telephone crowd your Formica-topped night stand. A color TV hangs from the ceiling across from your bed. The lights are turned off. A respirator, a heart-lung machine, and a small video camera connected to a monitor at the nurses' station sit against the wall in the shadow between your bed and the door. Whenever you move, the motor on the camera purrs and the camera adjusts itself to keep you perfectly in focus. On the other side of your bed, where the sunshine slants through the windows, an exercise bicycle and a Nautilus machine stand where the visitors' chairs used to be. There is no hand control on your bed to press to call a nurse. They took it away when they tired of your complaining. The TV and the radio both murmur softly.

You lie still, as if you are asleep, but your eyes are open. Your hair, what little there is, is white, your face is a mass of deep creases, and your watery eyes are sunk deep in their orbits, but your skin is a healthy pink. The telephone rings. You sigh, slowly turn your head without ruffling the covers tucked up under your chin, and glare at the telephone to make it stop ringing. It rings ten, fifteen, twenty times, a shrill bill collector's ring, then finally stops. You turn your head back towards the TV.

You have two doctors, the only two specialists who would treat you. In order to protect themselves from a malpractice suit, they won't tell you their names. They are both big, heavyset men with thinning hair and thick glasses. They look so much alike that it took you a long time to tell them apart. They always rush into the room in bloodstained surgical gowns, glance at the chart, nod and whisper to each other, fire off three or four questions without waiting for you to answer, and leave. They think you are dying of a unknown disease. They don't know if it is contagious.

Dr. A is the high-strung, guilt-ridden type. He doesn't like to lose. His hands trembled and he couldn't look you in the face when he gave you the bad news. He has prescribed an experimental drug therapy and bed rest to slow down the disease's progress while they run more tests and do a literature survey. Dr. B is forceful and self-confident. He likes to play the long shots. He told you matter-of-factly that it would be a good idea for you to put your papers in order. He has prescribed vitamins and exercise three times a day to keep your resistance up in case they diagnose the disease or discover a cure.
You are alone in the world. You never married. Your parents and brothers and sisters are all dead. Dozen of strangers claim to be your nephews and nieces. They have never been to see you in the hospital. They all think you are dead. You have never met any of them, but they all have produced wills which leave your estate to them even though you’ve never owned much of anything. Their lawyers hound you mercilessly, calling day and night. They have calm, emotionless voices, one almost indistinguishable from another, like the disc jockeys on public radio stations. Some accuse you of being an imposter and threaten you with jail. Others offer details of burial arrangements that their clients will provide for you if you will only admit that you are dead and that clients’ versions of the will are authentic. A few merely call to see if you are still claiming to be alive, your identity being a minor point since you’ll be out of the way soon enough. Regardless of their positions on the case, they all generate reams of documents tying up your estate.

You want to go home, but neither of your doctors will sign your release. Dr. B told you that the idea of leaving was suicidal and offered to recommend a psychiatrist. You were flabbergasted. When you tried to leave anyway, four burly male nurses in ill-fitting dirty-white clothing caught you at the elevator, dragged you back to your room and took your clothes away. Dr. A told you that you needed to get a grip on yourself if they were going to be able to help you at all. You argued with him and the nurse, and finally yelled down the hall demanding your civil rights. Someone called the hospital administrator, a sallow-complexioned man in a three-piece suit, who told you they had gotten a court order to keep you until you were well, so you had better make the best of it. That evening, when the nurses brought you your medication, they started tying you to the bed for the night.

Everyday in the hospital is the same. The menu rotates monotonously. Clear broth and red Jello for breakfast, lunch and dinner courtesy of Dr. A; cuts of rare meat and mixed, raw vegetables courtesy of Dr. B. The radio and TV programs come on and go off in their turn, one like another. The yellow flowers wilt and are replaced in the night while you sleep. Their scent never changes. Whenever you move, the camera motor purrs. The doctors step in for a minute and leave. The nurses come and go, asking the same questions and writing comments on your chart. You’re here, you see what happens, but you can’t keep it straight in your mind. You’re not sure how long you’ve been here anymore. You’re not sure if any progress is being made. You’re not even sure which doctor’s orders you’re following. Your chart tells you nothing. Whenever you look at it, the letters in the words crawl randomly around the page like a swarm of tiny, two-dimensional insects.

Your doctors tell you that you’re deteriorating; that there is nothing they can do. The nurses take away the exercise equipment and wheel the respirator and
heart-lung machine up to the side of your bed. They check the color-coded dials and switches to make sure that the machines will be ready at a moment’s notice. Several of the lawyers call, asking you to reconsider and admit the truth before it’s too late. The flowers wilt, but no one replaces them. The water in the vase begins to exude a musty odor. A mortician tries to sneak into the room to look you over while you’re taking a nap, but the squeaking of his shiny black shoes gives him away. He smiles a plastic smile, wipes his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief, sets his card on the night stand, and leaves without saying a word.

You lie here, straining your mind. You’re beginning to wonder if, in some way, they all aren’t right. You’re certainly no judge of what’s been going on. Why would they keep you here against your will if not for your own good? Why would the lawyers badger you if they didn’t have some legitimate claim? Maybe there’s some confusion in the records. Maybe they think you are someone else, a wealthy man with a large number of relatives who died of an unknown disease. But they ran the tests on you. The doctors, nurses, and lawyers all call you by name. Maybe you’re senile and are dying and just don’t know it. But you feel fine. You have no nephews and nieces. Surely you would remember one.

— Michael King